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Employment Issues Among Drug Court Participants¹

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Abstract

The overall goal of the current study, which is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (Grant #DA13076), is to develop and evaluate an enhanced Drug Court employment intervention with the goals of improving drug treatment retention and reducing recidivism. Focus groups were conducted with Drug Court clients in order to gain a better understanding of employment needs in order to target and refine the enhanced employment intervention. As expected, findings indicate that Drug Court participants encounter a variety of employment issues. Perhaps the major theme that emerged is the consistent difficulty expressed by participants in balancing work and treatment involvement. Implications from this study provide important insights for developing employment interventions, as well as for further research.

Efforts in the past decade have focused on developing and implementing treatment alternatives to incarceration for substance abusing offenders. One approach is Drug Court. Drug Courts provide court mandated, comprehensive interventions designed to control criminal activity and drug use among offenders who are living in the community (CASA, 1998). In April 1998, there were approximately 275 drugs courts operating in the United States (Belenko & Peugh, 1998). Nearly 100,000 drug offenders have participated in Drug Court programs nationwide since their inception in 1989, (American University, 1998) and nearly 71% of participants have successfully completed Drug Court or remain involved in Drug Court (US General Accounting Office, 1997).

The benefits of Drug Courts have been described as: 1) reduced recidivism; 2) decreased drug use while participants are in the program; 3) increased birth rates of drug-free babies to once addicted mothers; 4) increased access to alumni and mentoring groups; 5) increased efforts by clients at long-term relapse prevention efforts; and 6) cost-effective treatment (Belenko, 1998; OJP, 1997). An additional benefit for Drug Court participants is the opportunity to obtain and retain employment since almost all Drug Court programs provide vocational training and job development (OJP, 1997). This is considered a benefit as employment services may be needed and wanted by drug abusers, but extensive employment assistance is not generally part of drug treatment (Platt, 1995; Schottenfeld et al., 1992).

Positive treatment outcomes have also been related to pretreatment employment (Wickizer et al., 1994). Recent studies have shown that regular employment enhances self-esteem, provides a stable source of income, and offers an environment removed from a substance-using subculture (Belenko & Peugh, 1998). Stable employment has also been

related to decreases in substance use and criminal activity (Bachman et al., 1997; Kandel and Yamaguchi, 1987; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Since poorly paid, entry level service employment is widely available in the US (Burtless, 1997), these entry-level jobs become the usual sources of employment for Drug Court participants. Nevertheless, unrealistic expectations often occur when drug-abusing clients expect higher paying positions and higher salaries, but do not possess employment skills comparable to their employment expectations (French et al, 1992). (Berk, Leinihan, & Rossi, 1980). Uggen (1999) reported that high-quality jobs decreased the likelihood of criminal behavior independent of criminal history and substance use. Consequently, while attaining employment is important for many ex-offenders, job retention and upgrading to a higher quality job is also important.

This project builds upon completed process evaluation pilot work with Kentucky Drug Court participants. These pilot evaluations revealed that only 23% of clients were working full-time before entering Drug Court, and those with stable employment demonstrated greater drug treatment retention and successful treatment outcomes (CDAR, 1998; Logan, Leukefeld, & Williams, 1999). In light of these findings, the Drug Court judges expressed interest in enhanced Drug Court employment activities. Kentucky Drug Court judges indicated that getting a job is a minimal requirement for participants, which provides a foundation for gaining job skills, maintaining successful employment, and achieving promotions to upgrade their employment. Thus the purpose of the overall project is to build upon the existing services provided by Drug Courts and to focus on intervention on obtaining, maintaining, and upgrading employment for Drug Court clients.

Over the duration of the project, a sample of Drug Court participants from two Kentucky Drug Courts will be recruited and randomly assigned to an employment focused intervention group or to a control group (Drug Court as usual). Those in the intervention group will receive the enhanced employment intervention, which is designed to coincide with the three phases of Drug Court treatment. Treatment includes outpatient groups, AA/NA groups, and individual sessions focusing on addiction as well as criminal thinking and takes the average client 18 months to complete (see Table 1).

For clients randomly assigned to the enhanced employment intervention group, treatment will be complemented by job skill training, social skill training (Leukefeld, et al., 2000 in press), strengths based case management (Siegal et al., 1996), and motivational interviewing (Prochaska, & DiClemente, 1986). Pre and post-test data will be collected from the intervention as well as the comparison group at baseline, graduation/termination, six-months, and 12-months after Drug Court graduation/termination.

The employment intervention is grounded in established job readiness and life skill training modules that are designed for individuals involved in the criminal justice system. Focus groups were conducted with Drug Court clients in order to gain a better understanding of employment needs in order to target and refine the enhanced employment intervention. Specifically, focus groups were used to: 1) examine how Drug Court participants obtained previous employment, 2) discuss issues which supported keeping and maintaining a job, and 3) identify specific skills needed to upgrade employment. Findings from these focus groups are presented in this paper.

Method

Participants

A purposive sample of 56 (20 female and 36 male) Drug Court clients participated in five separate focus groups. Participants were selected from three Kentucky Drug Courts. Demographic information was not collected from focus groups clients. However, a recent process evaluation indicated that Kentucky Drug Court participants are similar to national Drug Court clients (American University, 1998; CDAR, 1998) with an average age of 32 and 12 years of education. In addition, two-thirds were African American, and over half (61%) reported they had never been married. Nearly one-fourth (23%) reported chronic health problems, almost one in five reported emotional abuse, 15% reported physical abuse, and 7% reported any sexual abuse. Self-reported mental health symptoms were high with forty percent self-reporting depression, 47% reporting anxiety, 19% reporting suicidal thoughts in the month preceding the interview, and one in four reporting using medication for psychological problems. Family involvement with substances was high with 40% reporting at least one family member with a drug or alcohol problem and almost two thirds (62%) reported having at least one family member with psychological problems.

Procedure

Focus groups were used to identify employment needs and issues Drug Court clients face. Generally, focus groups are used to collect qualitative data from group interaction to produce insights and information (Morgan, 1988). These focus groups allowed for more in-depth, and sometimes sensitive, conversations about obtaining, maintaining, and upgrading employment. Table 1 contains a brief description of each

Drug Court treatment phase. Completing each phase and promotion to the next phase is determined by the individual's performance, completion of the assigned tasks, and cooperative behavior.

Focus group participants were selected from Phase Three of the Drug Court program since Phase Three participants were not eligible for project recruitment. Each focus group lasted about one hour, and participants were paid \$15. The focus groups were conducted in a group room at each of the three Drug Court offices. A moderator guided group discussion, while a co-moderator recorded responses. Focus group questions were grounded in the literature and included:

1. What kinds of things do you wish you'd known when you were looking for a job?
2. How did you get your last job?
3. Was getting a job different after you entered Drug Court?
4. What helped you keep your longest job?
5. How is keeping a job different for a person in Drug Court?
6. What do you need to do to get a better job?
7. What are the things that can be done to help Drug Court participants get better jobs?

The following introduction was used for each focus group:

“Thank you for taking time to meet with us today. My name is (moderator). You have been asked to participate in this focus group because you are currently involved in Drug Court. We are developing an employment program for Drug Courts, and we are interested in your opinions about employment. For this group, I will be asking questions to help our discussion. Everything we say today is strictly confidential. The project has a Federal Certificate of Confidentiality and has been approved by the University of Kentucky human subjects committee to protect your confidentiality. (Co-moderator) will be recording things said, but your name will not be used in any way. We are interested in hearing what you have to say. We are here to learn from you. There are no right or wrong answers, and we ask that everyone's opinion be respected. It is important that we hear from everyone. We're

very interested in your opinions and views. We ask that only one person talk at a time. You will be paid \$15 for your participation, please be sure to fill out the payment form before you leave. Does anybody have any questions about the study or this focus group?"

Focus Group Themes

Qualitative content methods were used to develop themes by analyzing narrative data obtained through the focus group interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Staton et al., 2000 in press). Respondents' comments followed three major themes, which paralleled the protocol questions. However, as expected, a number of other issues emerged. The primary themes are discussed below.

Obtaining a job

At Drug Court entry, participants agree to adhere to the Drug Court schedule including regular court appearances, weekly groups, AA/NA meetings, and random urine drug screening. Focus group participants indicated that the Drug Court schedule often conflicts with 9:00 to 5:00 work schedules, thereby making it necessary to obtain a job that provides flexible hours or night shifts. In addition, a Drug Court requirement is to obtain stable employment. Consequently, seasonal jobs or part-time jobs with irregular hours are not permissible. Participants indicated that they often settle for jobs that are not satisfying in order to meet the Drug Court employment requirements, which is reflected in a participant's statement, "You may just take a job that you don't like, just to have a job."

Another issue among participants related to obtaining a job included job-seeking skills. For example, when participants were asked how they located their last job, several mentioned reading the newspaper, temporary employment services, and friends or family contacts. Others mentioned local career resource centers, assistance from Drug Court

staff, going door to door, and sheltered workshops. One participant commented, “There are lots of jobs out there, if you can’t find one, you’re just not looking.” Other participants indicated that they would like to know more about employers who were likely to hire Drug Court participants, and that establishing a network of services with these employers would facilitate job searches. Along the same lines, participants wanted to know which employers do not conduct background checks so their records would not prohibit them from getting a job. Interest was also expressed about appropriate ways to present references on job applications which included who to list, who not to list, how to contact references in advance, and formatting references. Job interviews were also of interest to clients as well. Specifically, participants were interested in learning what to wear, how to sit, appropriate answers to “tough” interviewing questions, and how to deal with being asked about their “past”. Focus group participants also mentioned a desire for help in preparing resumes, particularly since many participants have limited work experience or large gaps of time between jobs that are “difficult to explain”. Thus, it was apparent that job skill training should constitute an important part of the employment intervention.

In addition to a demanding Drug Court treatment regimen, participants identified several barriers to obtaining employment. For example, most participants indicated that the major barrier to obtaining employment was having a felony conviction. One male noted that, “It’s always in the back of an employer’s mind—the fact that you’re a felon. They should give you a probation period in order to give you a chance.” Participants indicated that once a potential employer learned about their criminal record, potential employers no longer considered them. One participant said, “The police record just kills

you”. Other barriers to obtaining employment included inadequate education and work experience. Some participants had difficulties using public transportation to a job, particularly in rural areas. Others, particularly women, indicated that limited or no childcare was a barrier to finding and keeping a job.

Maintaining a job

The overwhelming majority of focus group participants indicated that the main reason for keeping a job was the need for stable income. Several participants were single parents who depended upon their salaries and benefits to provide for their children. Some considered themselves fortunate to have a job that paid a good salary, which was a motivating factor for maintaining employment. Another important reason for maintaining employment was a positive work environment including co-workers and a respectful employer. In fact, one participant indicated, “It’s really nice when they [employer] recognize how important you are and the work you do”. Participants recognized the advantage of an employer who understands the Drug Court schedule and makes allowances for demands. Finding a job with flexible hours and an understanding employer affects the ability of Drug Court participants to maintain employment during their treatment. Several participants indicated that they were able to maintain employment because they enjoyed their job and found work challenging. One woman indicated, “I love to work with people. My job as a cashier makes that possible, and it also gives me a lot of responsibility with the money. I like to be trusted.” Other participants mentioned they enjoyed being busy and recognized that having structure in their schedule decreased idle time.

Like obtaining employment, keeping a job is also different in Drug Court. Employment is often monitored by employer contacts and with receipt payment documentation by Drug Court staff. If Drug Court participants leave a job, they must have another job prearranged and approved by their Drug Court counselor. If clients are unable to find a job immediately, or if they leave a job without approval, they can temporarily meet their employment requirement with community service. However, given the pressures associated with working a stable job and meeting program requirements, focus group participants reported feeling stress in balancing their personal lives and families. “There is a lot to keep straight in my life--Drug Court, making it to work, making it to groups, and having to find sitters”; “Having to make classes, meetings, drops and keep a job is really hard and takes a lot of planning and discipline”; “I usually make sacrifices in my personal life—I just can’t get it all done”. Consequently, adapting to a treatment schedule and a new lifestyle also impacts maintaining employment.

Upgrading

A common finding across focus groups was that participants indicated that the key to getting a better job was having an education, experience, and training. Having a high school diploma or a GED are required before graduating from Drug Court. However, most participants said they needed additional vocational training or college in order to upgrade their employment. “Most high-paying places won’t even talk to you unless you’ve got at least some college”. Therefore, help with taking college entrance exams, obtaining college financial aid information, and getting information on vocational training programs were identified as needs.

Participants also expressed a need for more information about careers and job openings. “It’s important to know where to find good jobs, and where you can find jobs that have opportunities to advance and make more money”. Participants expressed interest in using a job developer with community job networks, particularly those who hire ex-offenders. Differences across Drug Court sites related to job development activities and community employer networks. Several Drug Court participants indicated that they had “a good sense of employers” who would hire ex-offenders while others had no idea. Several clients emphasized the importance of an understanding supervisor—which they indicated could be more difficult to find in “the better jobs”. For example, “It would be nice if employers could be educated about addiction. Just because we’ve made some mistakes, we’re not necessarily bad employees. Just because I had a drug problem doesn’t mean I can’t do a good job.” “It’s hard to hire a recovering addict if you don’t understand addiction.”

The need for job readiness skills which included interviewing, filling out employment applications, writing cover letters, and developing resumes was also identified. In fact, several participants indicated that they had resumes, but didn’t feel comfortable using them to get a “better” job. “I would love to be able to update my resume with my new job experiences, I would like for it to look good.” In addition, several participants expressed interest in completing a skills assessment and specifically wanted to know the types of jobs that would be suitable matches for their skills. Finding a job that a participant wanted was underscored as being important for upgrading employment.

A final theme that emerged was that upgrading employment may depend on accessing better jobs. For example, women seemed more likely to settle for either a childcare job or enabled them to work flexible hours in order to meet their own childcare obligations. Consequently, for women, getting a “better job” was tied to financial opportunities as well as benefits which included childcare and insurance. It was also noted that in rural areas, access to jobs was affected by transportation. In fact, both rural males and females indicated they could not rely on public transportation, which is a major barrier to seeking certain jobs. While public transportation was available in urban areas, it can be unreliable and time-consuming.

Concluding Remarks

As expected, focus group findings indicate that Drug Court participants encounter a variety of employment issues. Perhaps the major theme that emerged is the consistent difficulty expressed by participants in balancing work and their drug court involvement. This finding is consistent with other studies which reported that drug abusers can have limited job related skills, particularly time management skills, the ability to meet role expectations, and difficulty in setting priorities (Kinney & Leaton, 1995). The Drug Court schedule is restrictive in comparison to the participants’ lifestyles when they used drugs. Managing life commitments during this phase requires good time management, particularly with the imposed structure and work demands that can and frequently do collide with Drug Court schedules and family needs. Given these demands, the employment intervention should include time management skills so participants can improve chances for their success.

Focus group participants indicated they often settled for less than satisfactory jobs in order to meet Drug Court employment requirements. Consequently, attitudes toward work range from impartial to negative. A somewhat surprising finding was the inconsistency of responses received about attitudes toward work. Some participants indicated they were “into their jobs” and Drug Court requirements suited their needs. Other participants seemed apathetic and almost removed from the process, while others were dissatisfied and bitter about “having” to work. Perhaps this is related to phase of Drug Court treatment—or perhaps it is related to their stage of recovery. It is also possible that there is an unknown factor related to job satisfaction for some who do not have extensive employment histories or skills, but are court mandated to work. Targeting the intervention and tailoring it for each participant is part of the challenge.

Another consistent theme that emerged from focus group discussions was that most participants wanted help in job readiness training and searching for a job. This finding is supported in the literature that identifies distinct employment needs for drug users (Platt, 1995). While many offender-based programs provide some type of pre-release planning or job readiness training, it is uncertain how these programs increase job opportunities and reduce drug use, recidivism, relapse, and crime. Focus group participants were interested in obtaining employment skills that included: interview preparation, resume writing, and job application skills, as well as skills to upgrade to a better job. Participants also indicated that a major employment issue is finding employers who were likely to hire ex-offenders. Consequently, Drug Court participants indicated that they would benefit from a network of services with employers who would hire Drug Court participants. In fact, studies show that, while the general attitude of

employers is hesitant about hiring ex-offenders, these relationships can be enhanced with incentives such as tax breaks, bonding, networks, and finding skilled, qualified, and dependable employees (Albright & Denq, 1996).

Based on these focus groups, specific information can be incorporated into employment interventions. For example, focus group participants indicated they were struggling with balancing work, Drug Court involvement, and family responsibilities. With this in mind, group sessions can be designed to target these areas, as well as time management. Networking and job development were also mentioned. Assisted job development could be incorporated which can be followed by self-directed job development to upgrade employment. Job readiness training including resume writing, job interviewing, and completing applications could be incorporated. Focus group participants indicated that emphasis should be placed on answering questions related to previous convictions and discussion on how these questions could be answered. Participants also indicated that increased educational and training opportunities should be made available which include scholarships, financial aid, grants, and other support. Sessions should cover issues related to overcoming job related barriers such as childcare and transportation—which is particularly important for women and rural residents.

There are limitations to this study. Participants were a small purposive sample of Drug Court clients in Kentucky. For this reason, results may not be generalizable to other Drug Court clients or other substance-abusing offenders. In addition, there is a potential bias of responses given the focus group setting, despite assured confidentiality. Regardless of these limitations, implications from this study provide important insights for developing employment interventions, as well as for further research. While the

issues affecting employment need to be further explored, these focus group findings suggest that Drug Court participants are expected to obtain a job and maintain stable employment. While employment can be considered extremely important to their recovery, Drug Court participants often encounter job retention issues related to their criminality and addiction. Research should continue to examine these issues in order to better understand employment service needs for substance abusing offenders.

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Table 1. Drug Court Phases

Phase	Approximate Time	Tasks
One	1 month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attend one Drug Court session per week, • provide all assigned drug screens each week • attend and document 12-step support meetings • attend all assigned groups, family and/or individual counseling sessions, • begin to make payments toward Court obligations • maintain Court-approved stable housing • maintain Court-approved employment training and/or educational referrals • turn in journal assignments • comply with any necessary medical referrals • purchase a NA or AA text book • begin work on a 12-step recovery program • obtain a sponsor
Two	8 – 10 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attend one Drug Court session every other week • begin payment of restitution and court costs • complete assigned readings • maintain daily physical activity • do at least one good deed per court appearance
Three	4 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • similar responsibilities as phase 2 • attend one Drug Court session every three weeks, • pay a substantial amount of restitution, • regularly mentor a new Drug Court participant and/or group session, • complete an exit calendar, exit interview, and plan for aftercare

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